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AUTHOR Schriber, Jacquelyn B.; And Others
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ABSTRACT

Two types of bias in the attribution process are the responsibility bias, in which individuals tend to assume more than their objective share of responsibility, and unrealistic optimism, in which individuals tend to assume that future outcomes will be positive. In order to investigate these self-serving biases among married and divorced individuals, and to show their association with the attribution of conflict in close relationships, 73 men and 86 women (97 married, 4 separated, 58 divorced) completed a mailed Marital Attitudes questionnaire. Results showed that, as predicted, individuals perceived themselves as both better than average and as more responsible for their partners' marital problems. The two forms of bias operated independently. The optimism bias was lower among divorced individuals and those with a higher level of conflict. The responsibility bias was unrelated to respondents' marital status or marital conflict. The findings suggest that there are at least two different types of self-serving bias in the attribution process of close relationships. Future research should address the relationship between the two. (LLL)

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Self-Serving Bias and the Attribution of Marital Conflict

Jacquelyn B. Schriber

Claremont Graduate School

Laurie Laiwood

Department of Management, University of Illinois

John L. Peterson

Black Studies Center, University of California at Los Angeles

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Running head: SELF-SERVING BIASES IN MARITAL CONFLICT

Abstract

Two types of self-serving bias (unrealistic optimism and responsibility) were examined in their relationship to conflict among married and divorced individuals. As predicted, individuals perceived themselves both as better than average and as more responsible than their partners for marital problems. Results indicated the two forms of bias operated independently. The optimism bias was lower among divorced individuals and among those with a higher level of conflict. The responsibility bias was unrelated to the respondents' marital status or marital conflict. These findings have important implications for both the study of self-serving biases in the attribution process, and the understanding of marital conflict.

Self-Serving Bias and the Attribution of Marital Conflict

Although the rate of marital dissolution in the United States is now higher than at any time in the past, the factors contributing to this phenomenon have not been fully determined (Bersheid & Campbell, 1981). A potentially fruitful line of inquiry has been pursued by attribution researchers (Harvey, Wells, & Alvarez, 1978; Hill, Rubin, & Peplau, 1976; Orvis, Kelley, & Butler, 1976). These investigators have examined the attribution of conflict within the context of close relationships. Similarly, others (Ross & Sicoly, 1979; Thompson & Kelley, 1981) have examined the extent of and explanation for egocentric or self-serving biases in close relationships. The purposes of the present study were to 1) investigate self-serving biases among both married and divorced couples, and 2) show the association of these biases with the attribution of conflict in close relationships.

Two types of bias in the attribution process are the responsibility bias and the unrealistic optimism bias. Responsibility bias may be defined as an individual's tendency to assume more than his or her share of the objective responsibility for an outcome regardless of the outcome's positive or negative value (Ross & Sicoly, 1979; Thompson & Kelley, 1981). The unrealistic optimism bias refers to an individual's tendency to expect the majority of future outcomes to be positive, irrespective of objective data or statistical improbabilities (Blascovich, Ginsburg, & Howe, 1975; Harris & Guten, 1979; Larwood, 1978; Larwood & Whittaker, 1977; Miller & Ross, 1975; Weinstein, 1980).

In the present study, we anticipated that individuals in close relationships would assume more responsibility for difficulties than they would attribute to their partners (H1). Further, we expected that individuals would display optimism bias within the boundaries of the marital relationship, seeing themselves as better than average marriage partners, and seeing their relationships as having a better than average chance of success. However, the experience of personal failure appears to moderate optimism bias (Larwood, 1978; Larwood & Whittaker, 1977; Regan, Gosselink, Hubsch, & Ulsch, 1975). Therefore, if divorce is considered a personal failure, both married and divorced individuals should exhibit unrealistic optimism bias toward their marriages (H2), but the level of bias for divorced or separated persons should be lower than that of married persons (H3).

In a similar vein, it seemed plausible that the extent of conflict experienced within a relationship is linked to the individual's level of optimism bias. Specifically, those persons who perceived more difficulty with their relationships might be expected to report less optimism concerning the success of those relationships and see themselves as less desirable marriage partners (H4).

Finally, we anticipated that if individuals considered themselves more likely than average to succeed in marriage, then they would also perceive themselves as expending more effort to ensure the success of their relationships (H5) (cf. Miller & Ross, 1975; Shaw, 1980).

Method

Participants

Survey participants were identified through local legal notices that had recently been published in Los Angeles County. A total of 159 respondents returned useable questionnaires (73 men and 86 women). The typical respondent was age 36 and had a family income over $22,000. Ninety-seven individuals were married (average time of 10.8 years), 4 were separated and 58 were divorced (average time of 3.1 years).

Procedure

Participants were asked to complete a "Marital Attitudes Questionnaire" assessing "attitudes toward marriage, divorce, and close personal relationships." They were promised anonymity and were asked not to discuss their responses with their present or former spouse until each had mailed back the survey. Couples living together were mailed separate questionnaires addressed to each individual.

Questionnaire

The survey consisted of three sections. The first assessed background information such as age and income. The second section contained four measures of self-serving bias potentially important to the marital relationship. The final section assessed the extent to which each of fifteen potential problem areas was perceived by the respondent as important to self, and separately, to the present or most recent spouse. Both the second and the third sections used 7-point bipolar scales.

Results

Responsibility Bias

The first hypothesis predicted that respondents would take more responsibility for difficulties in their relationships than they would attribute to their partners. In a *t*-test of the mean against the expected value of "4" (indicating no bias), respondents generally attributed more blame to themselves than to their partners ($M = 4.26$; $t(154) = 3.18$; $p < .001$). Thus hypothesis one was supported--the individuals surveyed showed a responsibility bias in their willingness to assume blame for marital difficulties. As expected, no significant differences were found between married ($M = 4.32$) and divorced ($M = 4.17$) respondents in the amount of responsibility bias reported.

Optimism Bias

Hypotheses 2 and 3 predicted that optimism bias would be shown by respondents, and that the level of this bias would be significantly lower among those who were currently divorced or separated. Again, *t*-tests of the means against the expected value of "4" (which indicated no bias in either direction) were calculated.

Respondents generally answered that their present or future marriage was more likely to succeed ($M = 5.58$; $t(153) = 12.37$; $p < .001$). Also as expected, the mean for the married respondent group was significantly higher than for the divorced and separated group ($M = 6.16$ and 4.67 respectively; $t(89) = 6.41$; $p < .001$). Interestingly, each group was, itself, significantly biased above

the expected value of "4" (married: $t(89) = 17.15$; $p < .001$, divorced and separated: $t(59) = 3.10$; $p < .01$).

On a second measure of optimism bias, respondents perceived that they were easier than average to live with ($M = 4.29$; $t(154) = 2.22$; $p < .05$ by a one-tailed test). The currently married participants responded above the expected value ($M = 4.38$; $t(95) = 2.44$; $p < .05$) while divorced and separated participants did not ($M = 4.15$; $t(58) = .64$; n.s.). These results strongly support both the second and the third hypotheses. As a group, the respondents displayed optimism bias both with regard to their future likelihood of success in marriage and to their own perceptions of themselves as desirable marriage partners. Also, as predicted, optimism bias was higher among the married respondents. Divorced and separated respondents, however, indicated lower optimism regarding future success in marriage and only average desirability as marriage partners.

Additionally, it is important to recognize that the responsibility and optimism questions apparently measure different effects. The correlations between the responsibility item and the optimism items (marital success and difficulty to live with) were not significant ($r(151) = -.085$, and $-.070$ respectively, n.s.).

Self-Serving Bias and Perceived Conflict

Respondents examined fifteen potential marital problem areas from two points of view: the extent to which the area was a problem for them, and the extent to which they believed the area was a problem for their current or most recent marital partner. Correlations

between the problem areas and the two measures of optimism bias are listed in Table 1.

Insert Table 1 about here

Supporting our fourth prediction, individuals who showed lower degrees of bias were in fact more likely to see the potential problem areas as difficult to manage, both for themselves and for their partners. Fifty-eight of the sixty tests were in the predicted direction ($p < .001$ by a one-tailed binomial test); thirty-two of the individual tests reached significance.

Two other conservative tests of this hypothesis were also calculated. An area of conflict might be defined as a disagreement between partners rather than merely understanding that a problem exists. The absolute value of the difference between responses for self and for partner was used as the measure of this type of conflict. Table 1 also shows the Pearson correlation coefficients between the two optimism bias questions and the calculated conflict scores. Twenty-nine of the thirty bias by conflict coefficients were in the predicted direction ($p < .001$ by a one-tailed binomial test). Of the 30 coefficients, 15 were significant in the direction predicted.

It might also be argued that the problem areas listed in Table 1 require the participants to evaluate many areas in which they actually feel no conflicts, thereby artificially enhancing the effect of any underlying biases they may have experienced. As a consequence,

the second conservative test re-examined the data to assess the relationship between the number of problem areas perceived and self-serving bias. A problem area was coded as showing conflict if it was rated toward the "very much of a problem" end of the seven-point scale (i.e., coded a 1 if the respondent had circled a 1, 2, or 3, or a 0 if not). Scores for each individual ranged from 0 to 15, with means of 3.17 (self) and 3.10 (partner).

These results were consistent with the anticipated negative relationship between self-serving bias and marital problems in each of four tests. The attribution of fewer problem areas both to the self and to the current or former spouse was associated with higher optimism bias toward marriage ($r(139,136) = -.425, -.331$ respectively, $p < .01$ by a one-tailed test) and with the individual's belief that he or she was easier to live with ($r(139,136) = -.139, -.179$ respectively, $p < .05$). An examination of the relationships between responsibility bias and the extent and number of marital conflicts yielded no significant correlations. Overall, these results indicate that biased individuals are more likely than others to turn a deaf ear to potential marital difficulties, and that perceptions of conflict are associated with a decrease in bias.

Self-Serving Bias, Level of Effort, and Conflict

The fifth hypothesis predicted that people who saw their marriages as more successful would view themselves as making a greater effort to ensure its success. As expected, effort in maintaining the relationship was positively related to the projected likelihood of

the relationship being successful ($r(149) = .224$, $p < .01$). Similarly, level of effort was significantly correlated with a view of self as easy to live with ($r(150) = .246$, $p < .01$), suggesting that those who expended less effort were particularly pessimistic not only regarding their future success in marriage but also the ease with which they can live in a close relationship.

Finally, two other results are worth noting. First, our respondents reported that they felt they tried harder than the average person to maintain their relationships ($M = 2.70$; $t(154) = 9.30$; $p < .001$ for a one-tailed test of the difference between the mean and the expected value of 4). Second, the correlation between level of effort expended and responsibility bias was not significant ($r(152) = -.004$).

Discussion

While some recent research (Ross & Sicoly, 1979; Thompson & Kelley, 1981) has examined self-serving bias of responsibility in close relationships, no prior data has described the unrealistic optimism and the responsibility biases together, or compared bias levels between married and divorced individuals. The results of the present study revealed strong biases of both types, with some differences by marital status, and led to several conclusions.

Both Ross and Sicoly (1979) and Thompson and Kelley (1981) found that partners in couple relationships displayed egocentric responsibility biases. However, the focus of their research was on the amount of responsibility each partner took for various

activities in the relationship. Our research extends that work by revealing that individuals in couples' relationships also display self-serving biases with regard to responsibility for dyadic conflict and marital difficulties. Further, Thompson and Kelley note that responsibility bias is evident in relationships that are perceived as satisfactory. The results of the present study indicate that responsibility bias is also present when relationships are experienced as unsatisfactory. There was no significant difference between married and divorced respondents in the amount of responsibility bias reported, and individuals in both marital status groups took greater than average responsibility for the marital problems that occurred.

Optimism bias has not been previously investigated within the context of close personal relationships. The data from our research showed that both married and divorced individuals hold such a bias, but that the experience of marital dissolution severely reduces the level of such bias. Specifically, divorced persons lowered their estimation of future success in marriage (though maintaining it at an above average level), and perceived themselves as no easier than average to live with. These results are more conveniently interpreted from an information processing perspective of self-serving bias (Larwood & Whittaker, 1977; Miller & Ross, 1975; Regan, Gosselink, Hubsch, & Ulsch, 1975), than from a motivational perspective (Bradley, 1978; Weary, 1979). Marital conflict and failure may have served to provide individuals with information concerning themselves and

their true likelihood of marital success.

Another important finding is that the responsibility bias and the optimism bias were unrelated. Responsibility bias was also unrelated to levels of conflict within relationships, to previous marital dissolution, and to the level of effort expended in maintaining close personal relationships. Optimism bias, however, appeared to be associated with perceptions of conflict and the experience of divorce, and was directly and positively related to the level of effort said to be expended in maintaining close relationships. Thus, we can conclude that an individual can see his- or herself as optimistically more likely to succeed, while simultaneously more likely to feel responsible for the possibility of failure. However, should such failure appear evident through heightened levels of conflict, a person may most likely reduce the level of effort expended in maintaining that relationship--perhaps with the thought of moving on to another relationship with an only slightly diminished optimism bias of success.

Taken together, these results may help explain why marriage is still so popular in the face of a high divorce rate, and why remarriage among the divorced is common. Persons who have never married may have an even higher optimism bias than married individuals and may therefore look forward to being married in the future. This would not be surprising considering the myths that pervade American culture about being married "happily ever after." Our data showed that the divorced believed they had a

greater than average likelihood of marital success, even though their optimism was not as high as that of the married respondents. Further, like their married counterparts, the divorced reported a tendency to take responsibility for previous difficulties. In a similar vein, a study by Newman and Langer (1981) of post-divorce adaptation revealed a positive correlation between blaming the partner and lowered positive feelings about future relationships. Thus, the high remarriage rate among the divorced may be the result of high levels of optimism and responsibility biases complemented by determination not to make the same mistakes again.

In conclusion, it appears that there are at least two different types of self-serving bias in the attribution process of close relationships. Any useful model of self-serving attributional bias in couples' relationships should address the association between the two, and demonstrate the conditions under which each operates, and the underlying mechanisms for them.

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Authors' Notes

Correspondence and requests for reprints should be sent to Dr. Laurie Larwood, Head, Department of Management, University of Illinois, Box 4348, Chicago, IL 60680.

Table 1

Correlation of Better-than-Average Self-Serving Bias with Problem and Conflict Areas

Problem/Conflict Area	Bias Items: Likelihood of Marital Success			Bias Items: View of Self as Difficult to Live With		
	Self	Spouse	Conflict	Self	Spouse	Conflict
Boredom with the marriage	.327**	.337**	-.239**	.202**	.083	-.194**
Differences in interest	.360**	.372**	-.218**	.124	.168*	-.160*
Differences in intelligence	.266**	.273**	-.166*	.100	.124	-.050
Conflicting sexual attitudes	.284**	.178*	.000	.217**	.100	-.161*
Conflicting marriage ideas	.413**	.261**	-.273**	.211**	.111	-.244**
Own desire for independence	.376**	.489**	-.220**	.087	.242**	-.133
Partner's desire for independence	.278**	.258**	-.244*	.050	.072	-.069
Own interest in someone else	.222*	.212*	-.109	-.022	-.068	-.029

Table 1 (continued)

Problem/Conflict Area	Bias Items: Likelihood of Marital Success			Bias Items: View of Self as Difficult to Live With		
	Self	Spouse	Conflict	Self	Spouse	Conflict
Partner's interest in someone else	.374**	.174*	-.240**	.015	.020	-.056
Influence of own parents	.135	.183*	-.119	.172*	.156*	-.073
Influence of partner's parents	.099	.110	-.236**	.014	.080	-.087
Financial problems	.187*	.078	-.146*	.115	.093	-.038
Own work activities	.029	.222**	-.228**	.068	.074	-.005
Partner's work activities	.230**	.142*	-.216**	.151*	.115	-.093
Conflicting religious beliefs	.055	.004	-.032	.140*	.093	-.030

Note: N ranges from 145 to 151. Scaling on problem areas ranges from very much a problem (1) to not at all a problem (7). Conflict is the absolute value of the difference between self and spouse scales.

*p < .05 by a 1-tail test of the correlation coefficient. **p < .01.